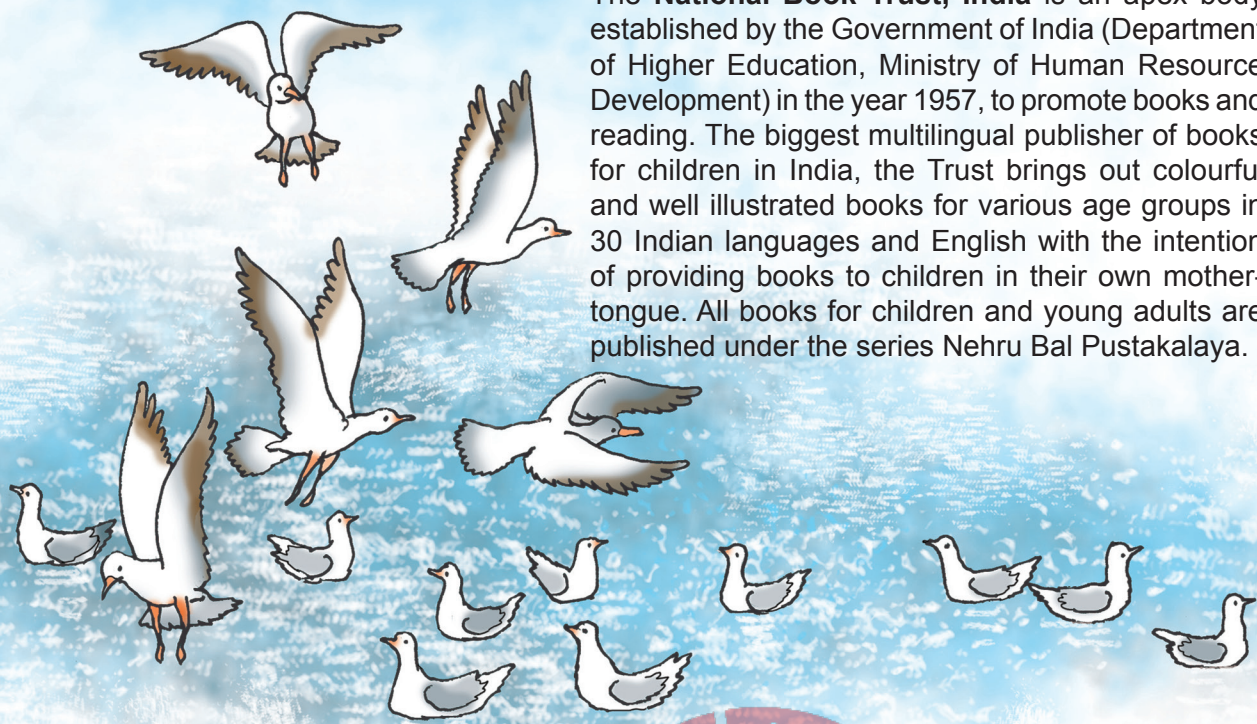


**For children of the
age group 8 to 10 years**

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Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

A VISIT TO
Kumbh

Anita Bhatnagar Jain



Illustrations
Partha Sengupta

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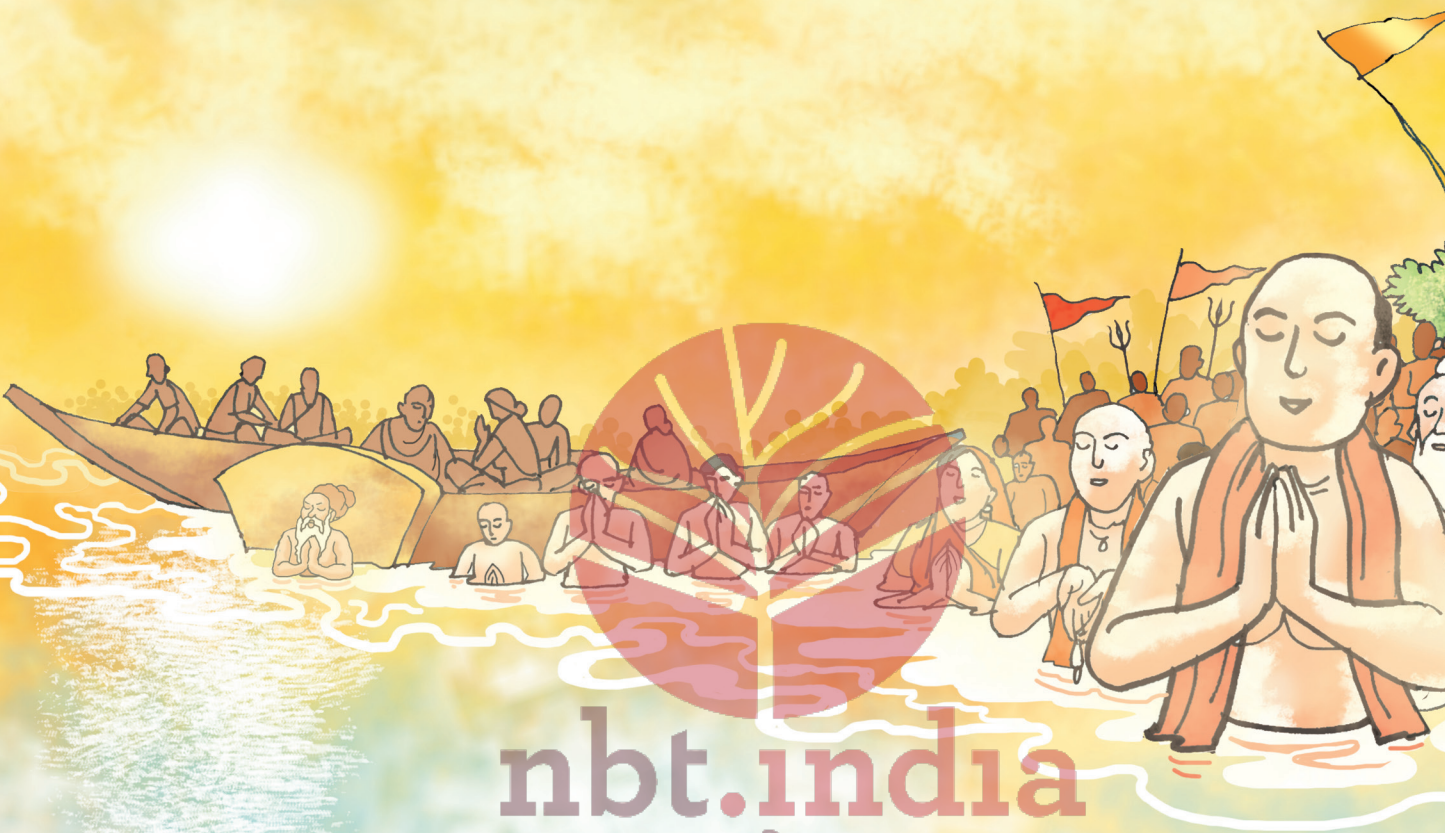


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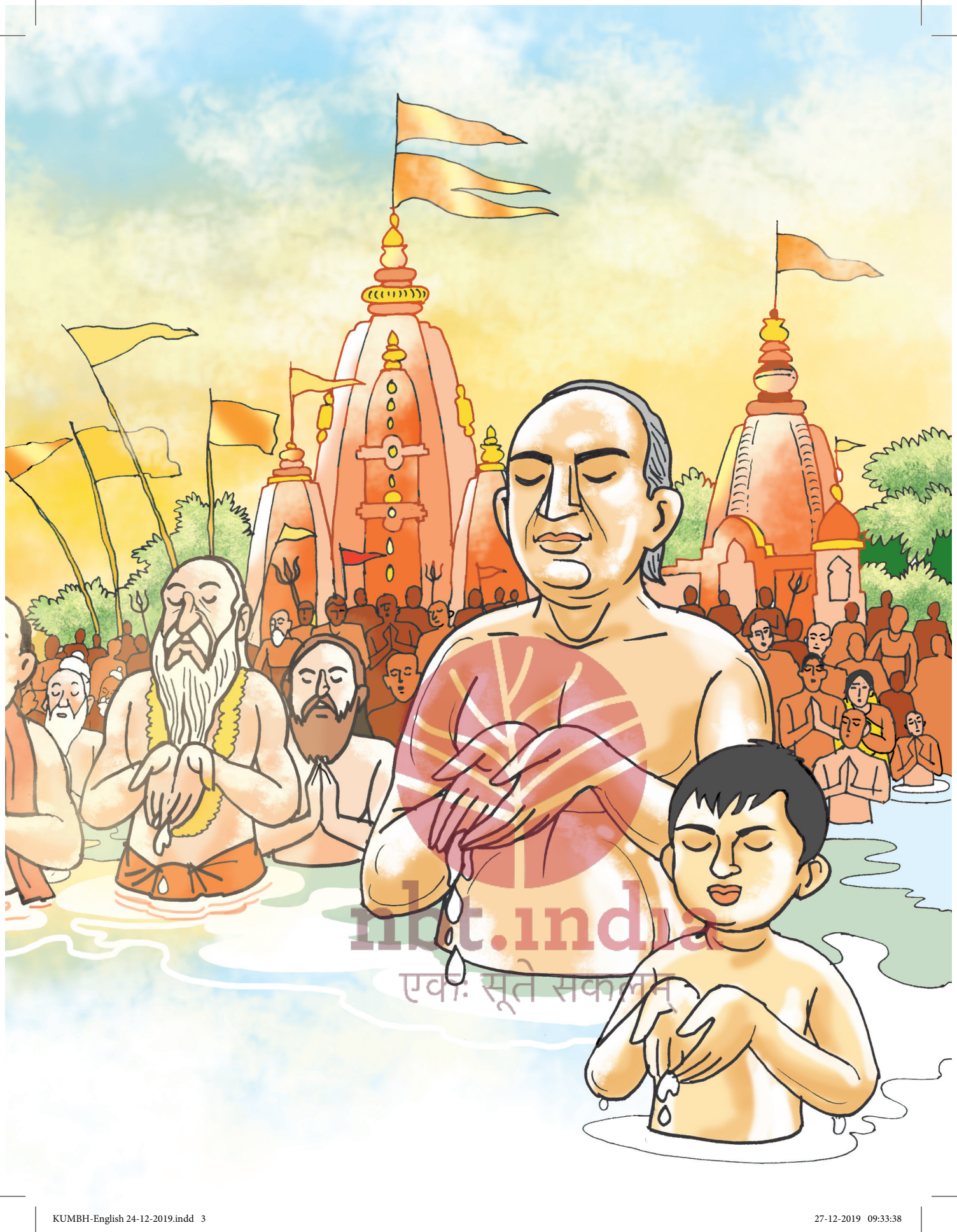
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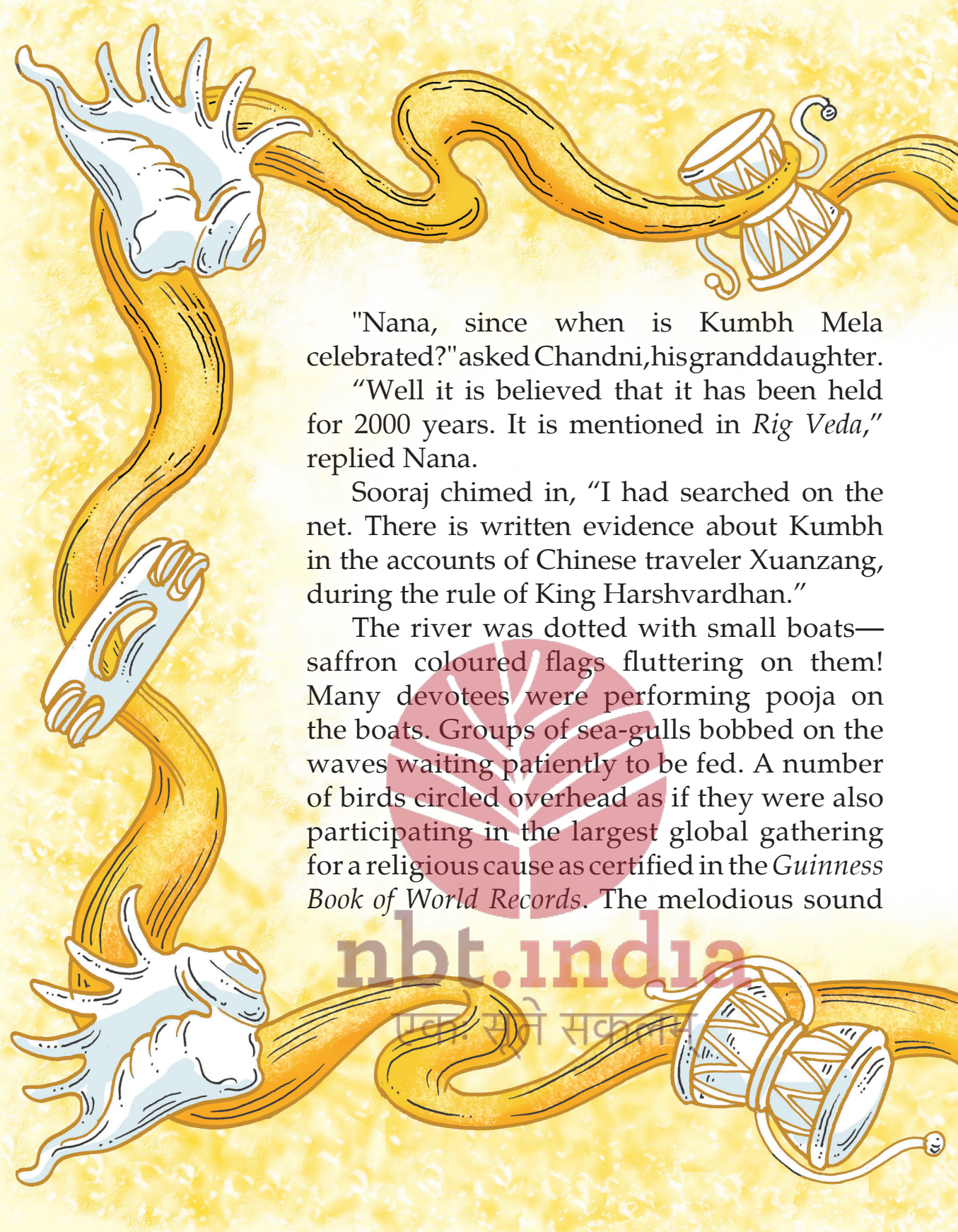
A splash, a shriek and shout of *Jai Ganga Maiya!* Sooraj stood besides his grandfather in chest high water, saluting the rising sun with folded hands. His grandmother sat on the gently swaying boat at the Sangam where the three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the underground Saraswati merge. Her face wreathed with smiles as her fingers moved the beads in the mala in jaap. It was her longstanding wish to visit Kumbh at Prayagraj or Allahabad.



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"Nana, since when is Kumbh Mela celebrated?" asked Chandni, his granddaughter.

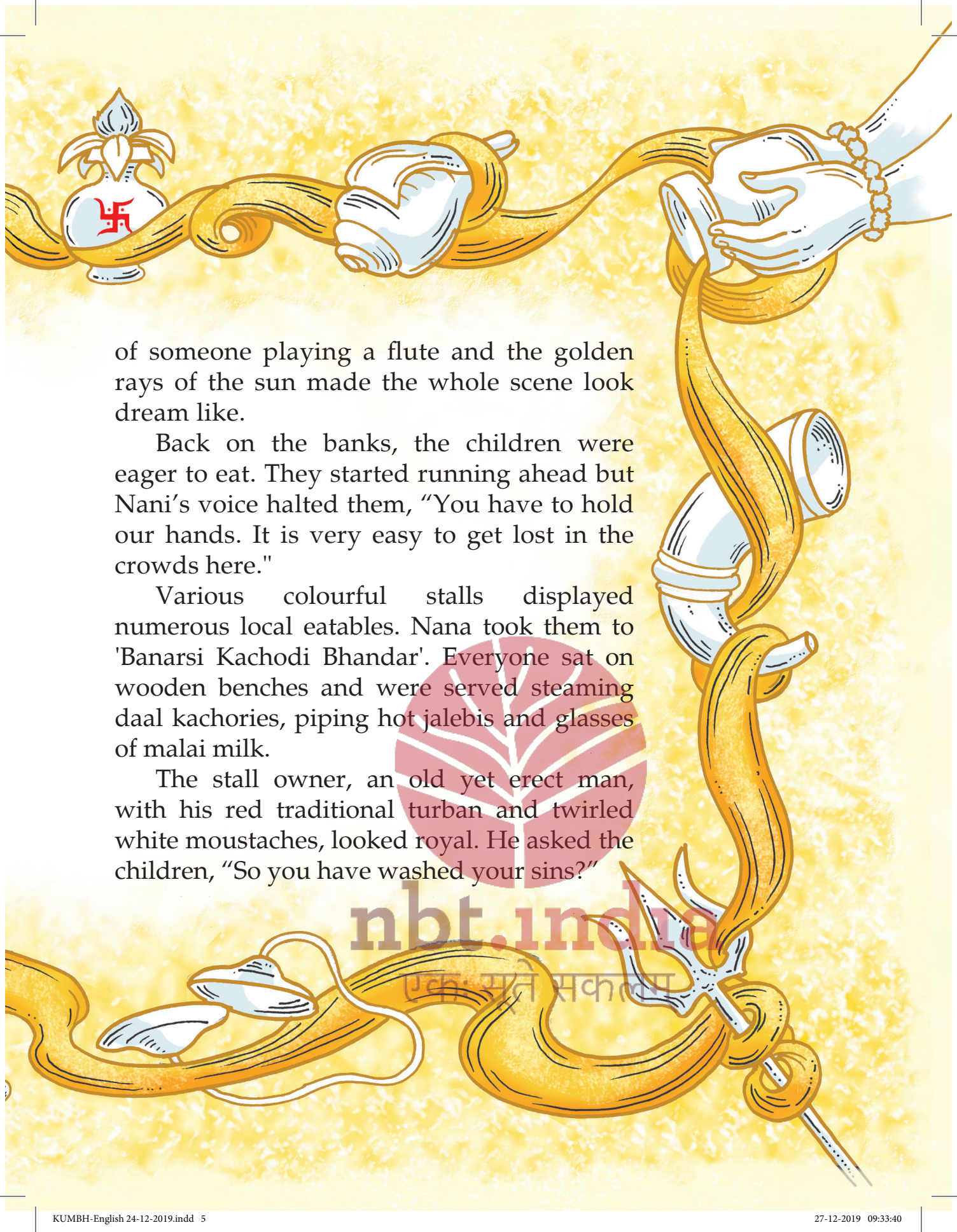
"Well it is believed that it has been held for 2000 years. It is mentioned in *Rig Veda*," replied Nana.

Sooraj chimed in, "I had searched on the net. There is written evidence about Kumbh in the accounts of Chinese traveler Xuanzang, during the rule of King Harshvardhan."

The river was dotted with small boats—saffron coloured flags fluttering on them! Many devotees were performing pooja on the boats. Groups of sea-gulls bobbed on the waves waiting patiently to be fed. A number of birds circled overhead as if they were also participating in the largest global gathering for a religious cause as certified in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. The melodious sound

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of someone playing a flute and the golden rays of the sun made the whole scene look dream like.

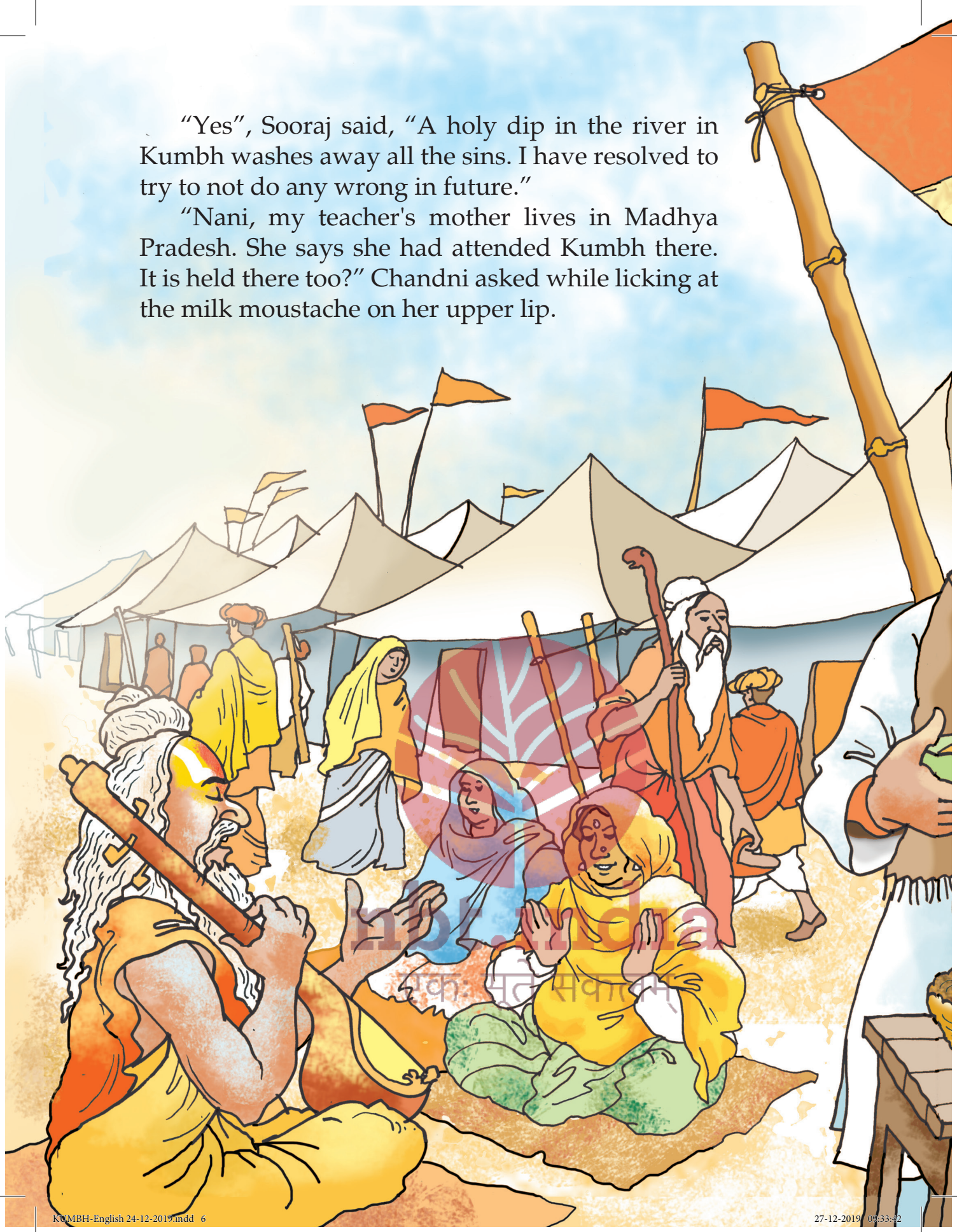
Back on the banks, the children were eager to eat. They started running ahead but Nani's voice halted them, "You have to hold our hands. It is very easy to get lost in the crowds here."

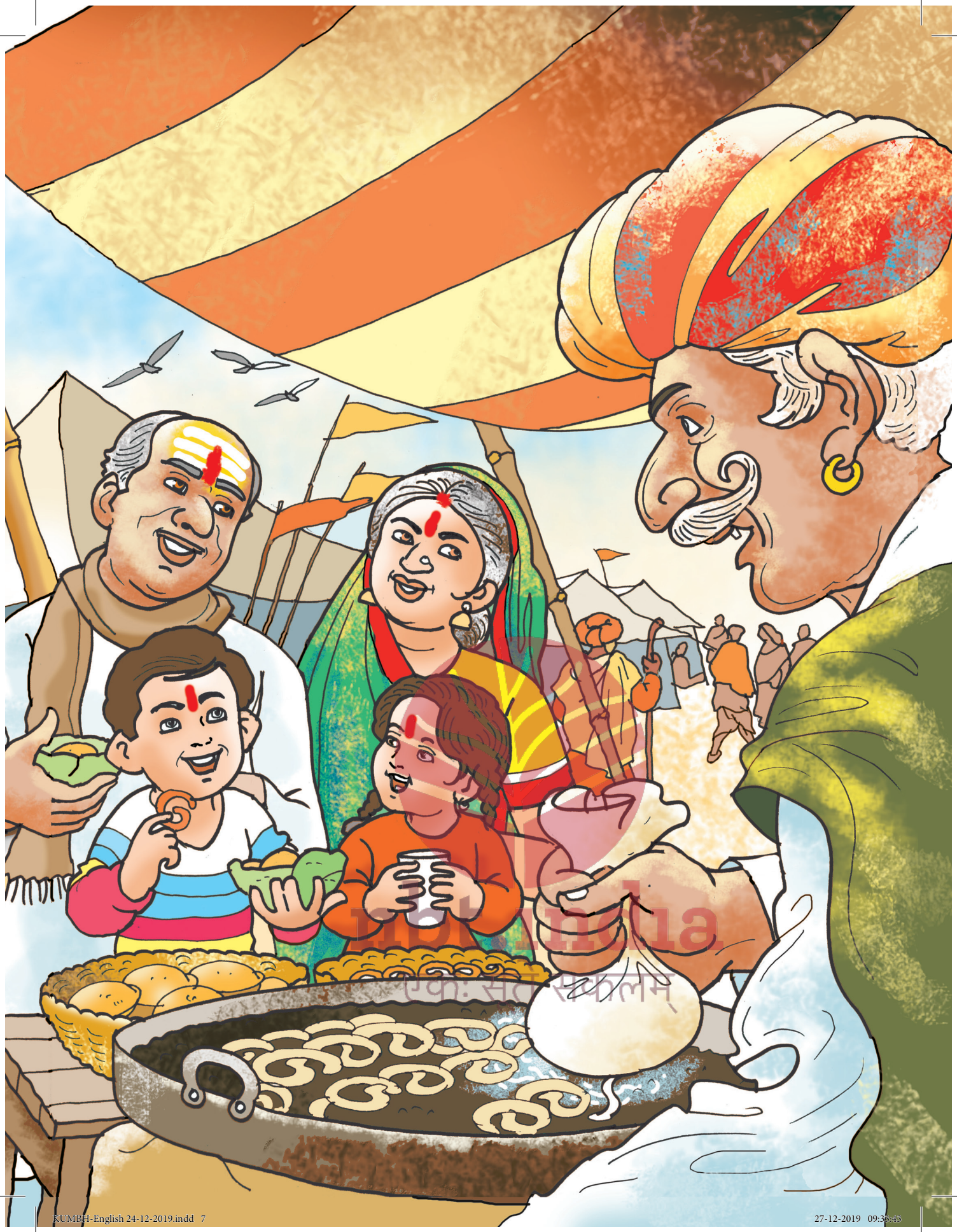
Various colourful stalls displayed numerous local eatables. Nana took them to 'Banarsi Kachodi Bhandar'. Everyone sat on wooden benches and were served steaming daal kachories, piping hot jalebis and glasses of malai milk.

The stall owner, an old yet erect man, with his red traditional turban and twirled white moustaches, looked royal. He asked the children, "So you have washed your sins?"

“Yes”, Sooraj said, “A holy dip in the river in Kumbh washes away all the sins. I have resolved to try to not do any wrong in future.”

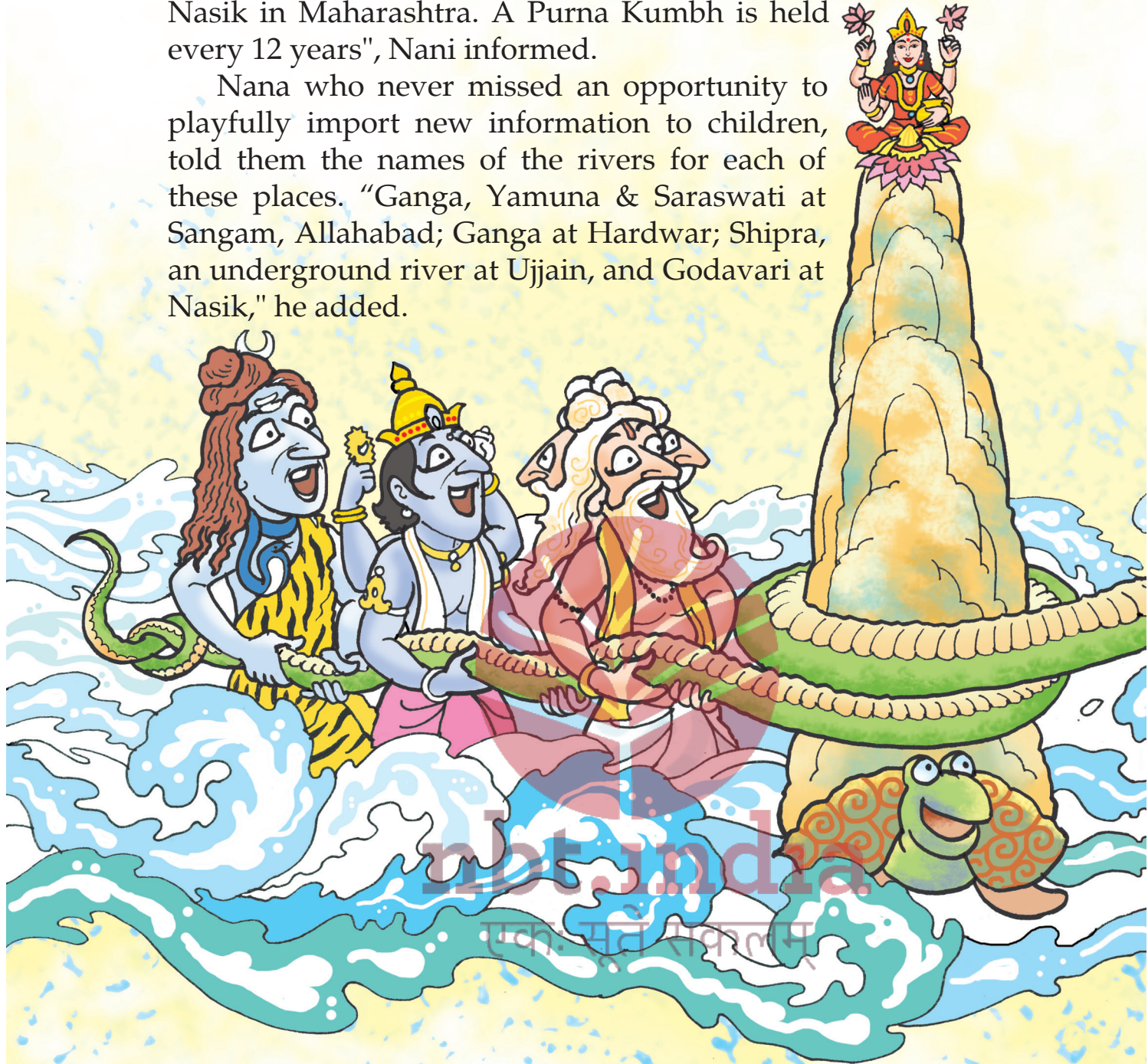
“Nani, my teacher's mother lives in Madhya Pradesh. She says she had attended Kumbh there. It is held there too?” Chandni asked while licking at the milk moustache on her upper lip.





"Yes, Kumbhmela is held every three years at four places, Allahabad, now called Prayagraj, in Utter Pradesh; Hardwar in Uttrakhand; Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, and Nasik in Maharashtra. A Purna Kumbh is held every 12 years", Nani informed.

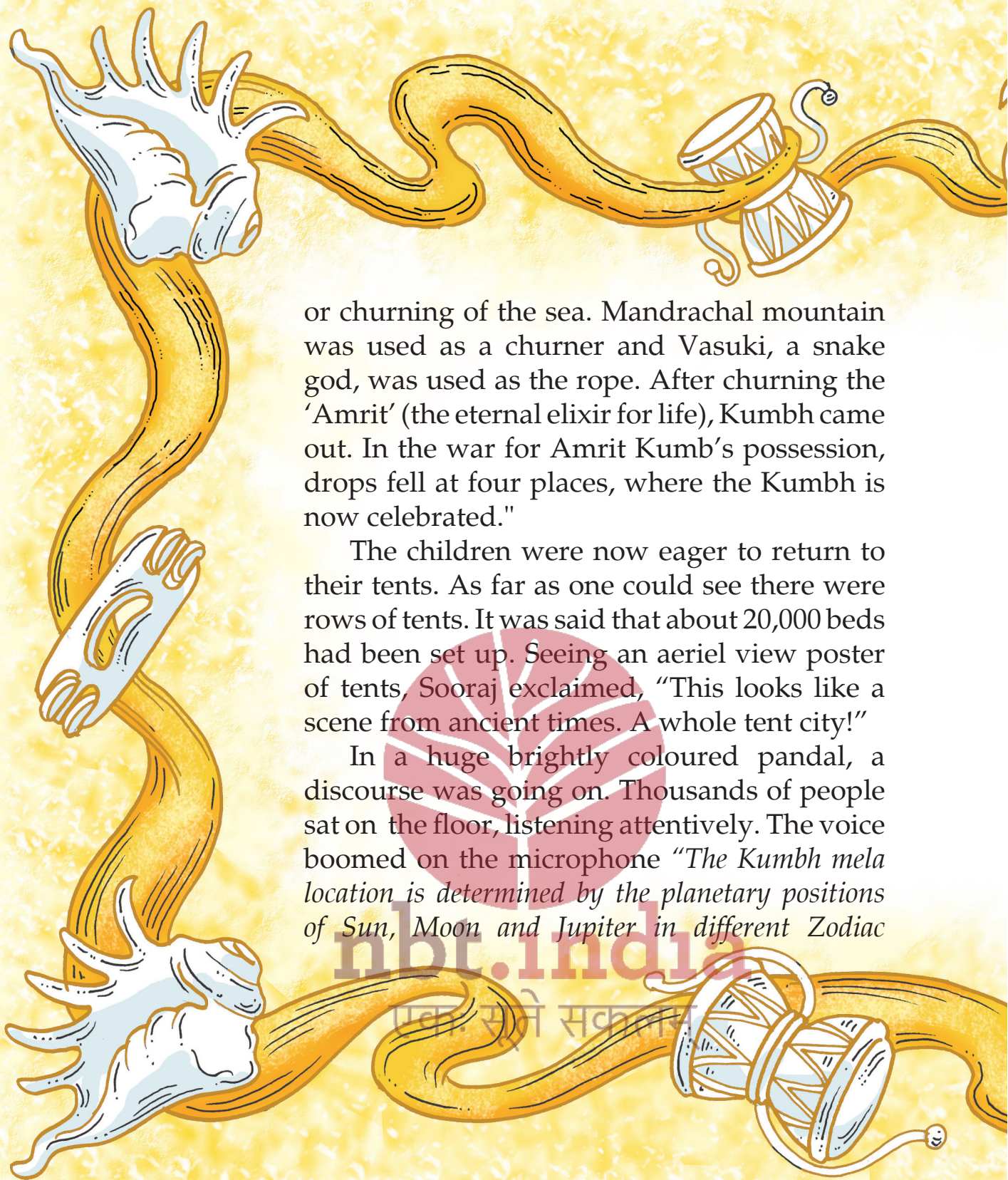
Nana who never missed an opportunity to playfully import new information to children, told them the names of the rivers for each of these places. "Ganga, Yamuna & Saraswati at Sangam, Allahabad; Ganga at Hardwar; Shipra, an underground river at Ujjain, and Godavari at Nasik," he added.



“Why at only these four places?” queried Chandani while biting into the crunchy jalebis.

Instead of Nana, the stall owner indulgently replied in a dramatic tone, “The most popular story is that in the battle between the devtas and demons, the devtas lost. So Indra, the God of Rain, went to Brahma Ji, who took him for help to Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu suggested ‘Samudra Manthan’

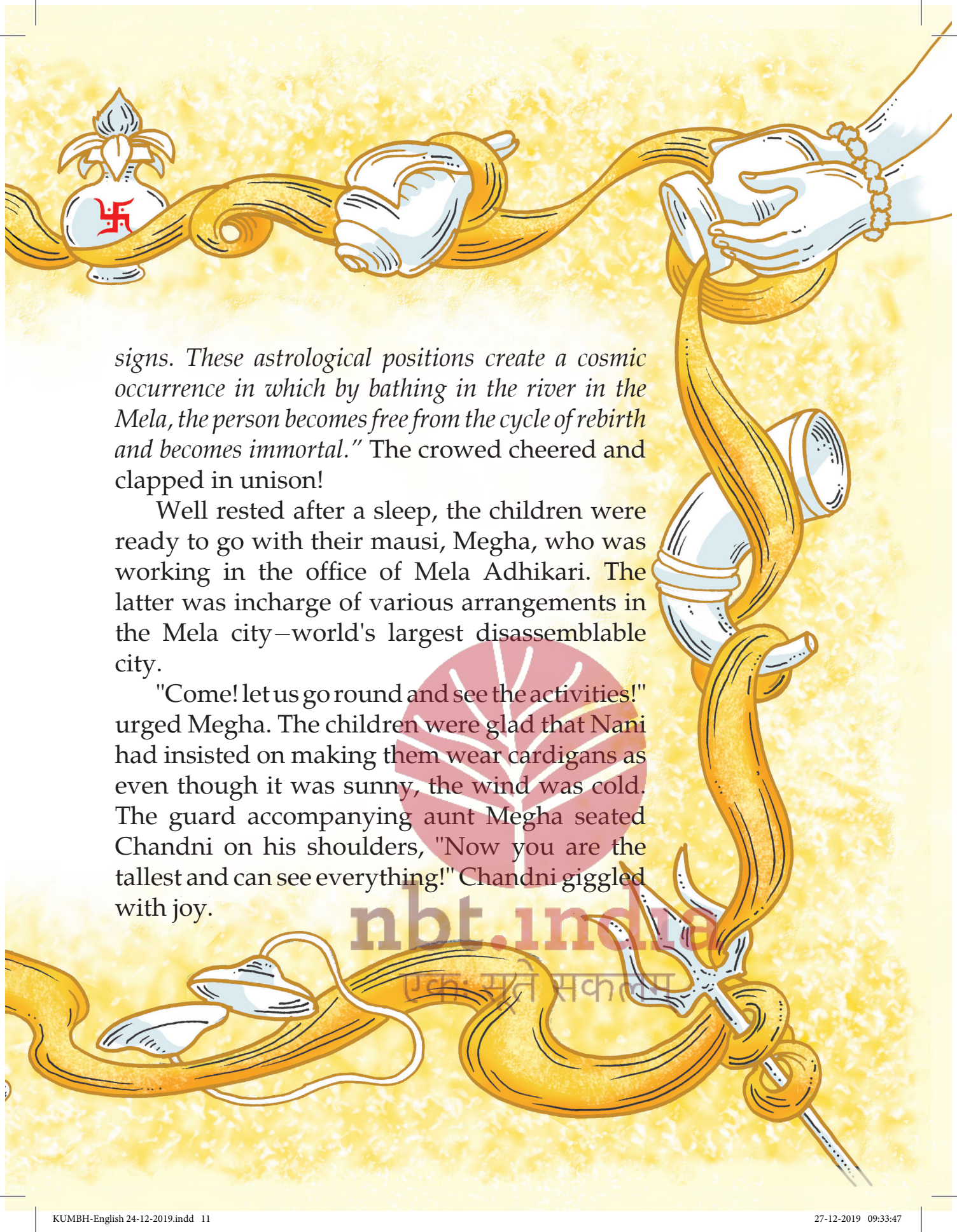




or churning of the sea. Mandrachal mountain was used as a churner and Vasuki, a snake god, was used as the rope. After churning the 'Amrit' (the eternal elixir for life), Kumbh came out. In the war for Amrit Kumb's possession, drops fell at four places, where the Kumbh is now celebrated."

The children were now eager to return to their tents. As far as one could see there were rows of tents. It was said that about 20,000 beds had been set up. Seeing an aerial view poster of tents, Sooraj exclaimed, "This looks like a scene from ancient times. A whole tent city!"

In a huge brightly coloured pandal, a discourse was going on. Thousands of people sat on the floor, listening attentively. The voice boomed on the microphone "The Kumbh mela location is determined by the planetary positions of Sun, Moon and Jupiter in different Zodiac

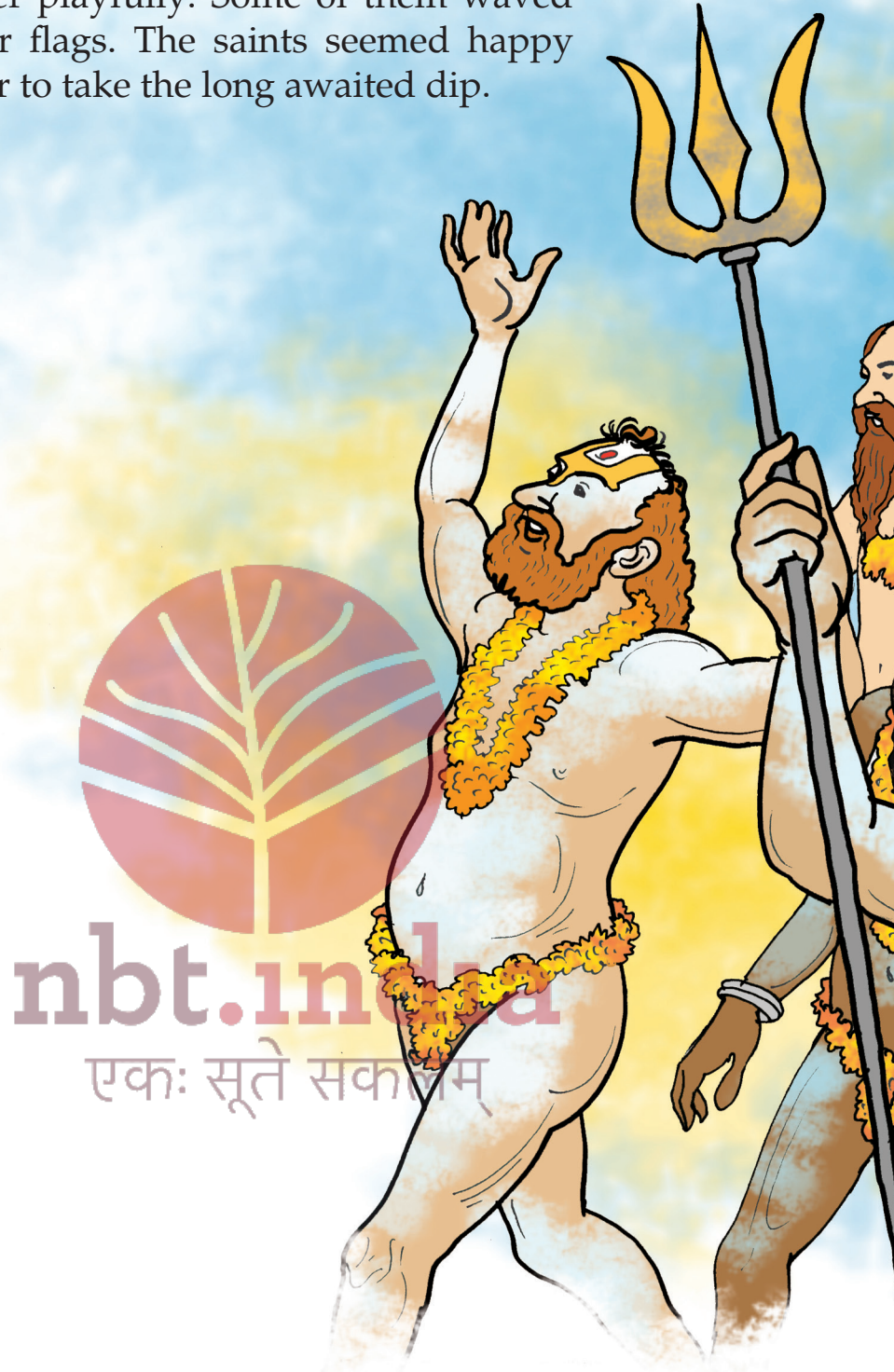


signs. These astrological positions create a cosmic occurrence in which by bathing in the river in the Mela, the person becomes free from the cycle of rebirth and becomes immortal." The crowd cheered and clapped in unison!

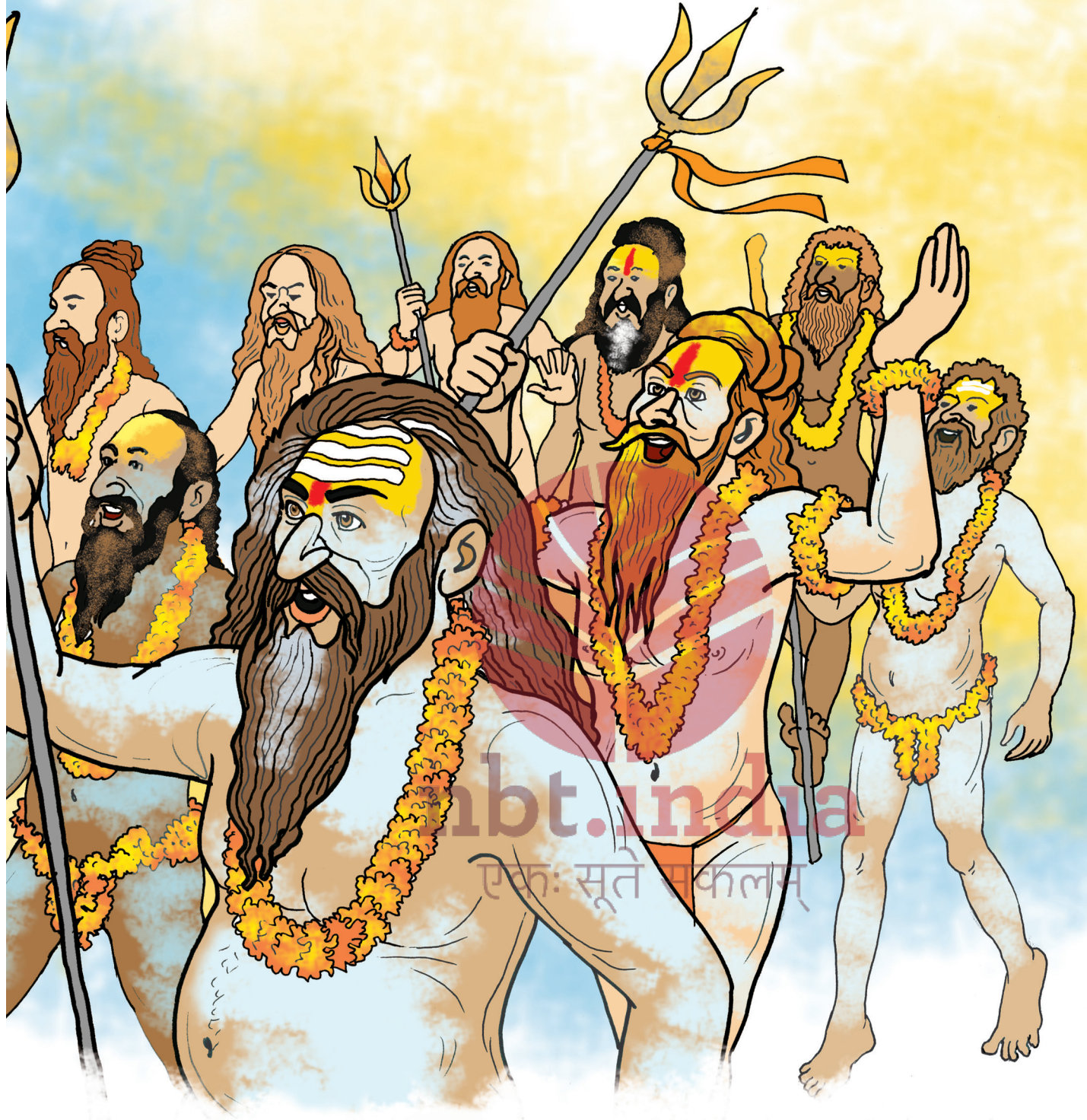
Well rested after a sleep, the children were ready to go with their mausi, Megha, who was working in the office of Mela Adhikari. The latter was in charge of various arrangements in the Mela city—world's largest disassemblable city.

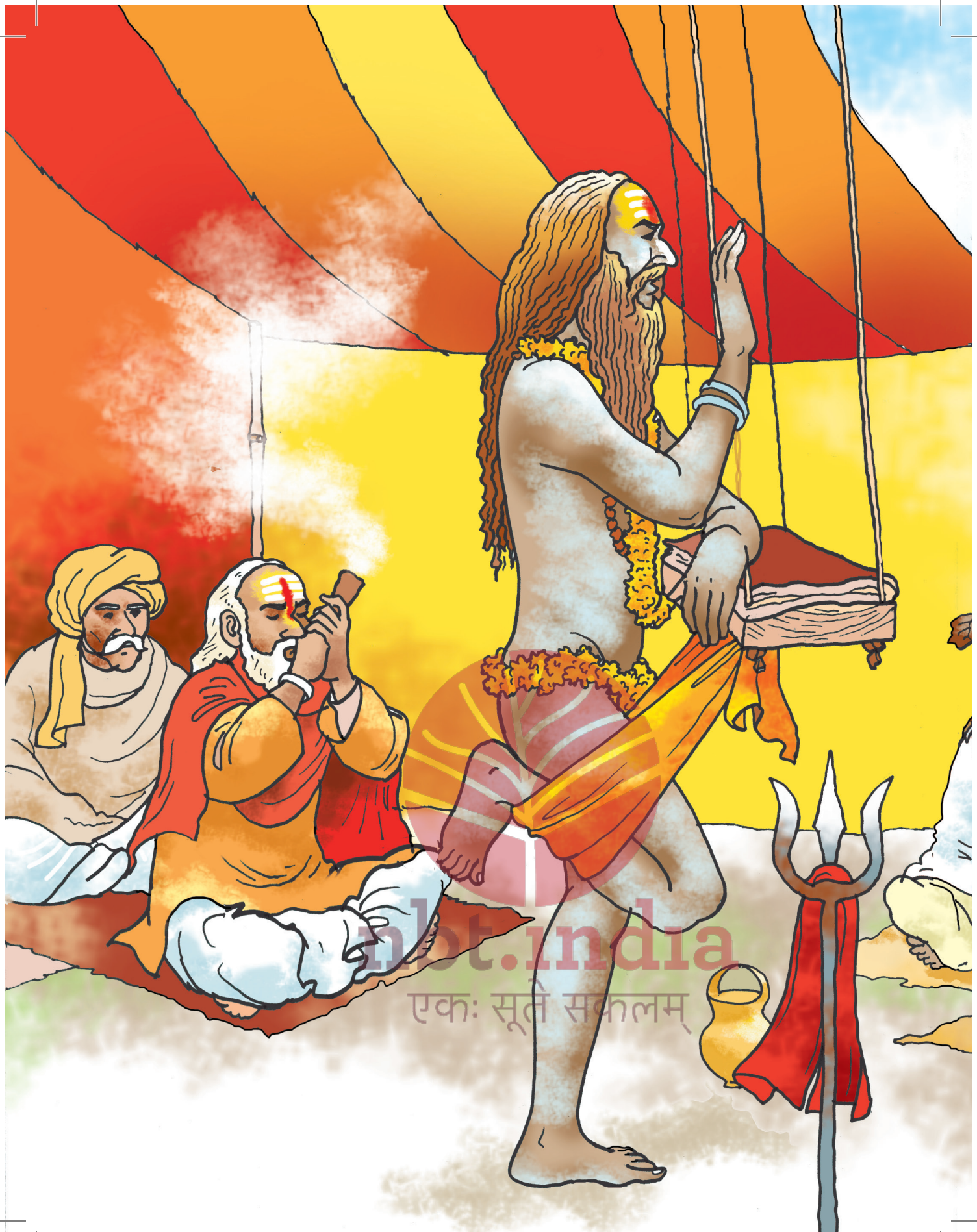
"Come! let us go round and see the activities!" urged Megha. The children were glad that Nani had insisted on making them wear cardigans as even though it was sunny, the wind was cold. The guard accompanying aunt Megha seated Chandni on his shoulders, "Now you are the tallest and can see everything!" Chandni giggled with joy.

Everyone stood on the side to give way to a procession of Naga babas. Young and old alike, they all were not wearing any clothes. Huge tilaks on foreheads, garlands of marigolds in their necks and around the waist, bodies rubbed with ash, they nudged each other playfully. Some of them waved trishul, swords or flags. The saints seemed happy like children eager to take the long awaited dip.



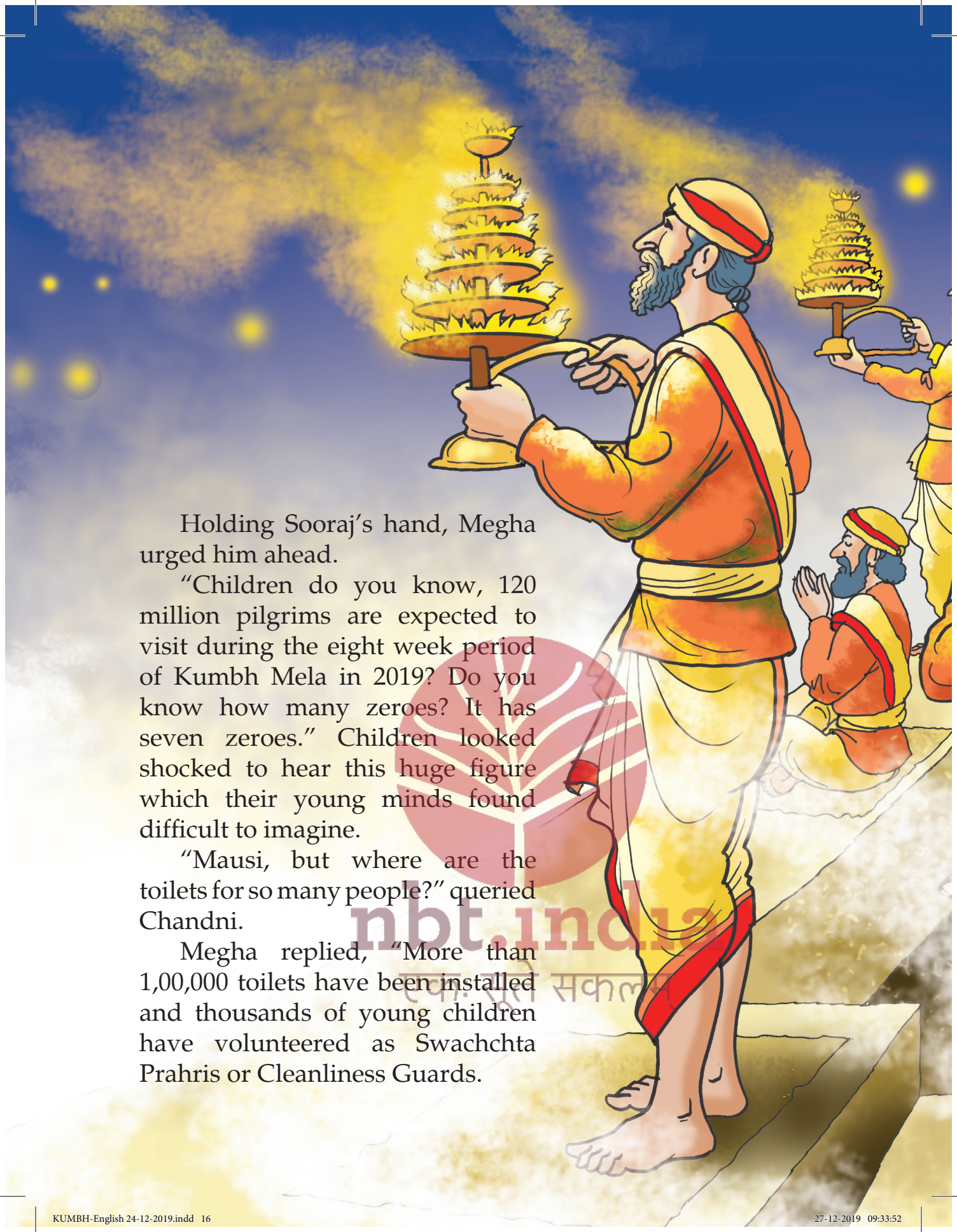
Sooraj could not help asking, "Mausi. They do not feel cold?"
"Yes they do, but their willpower helps them. See our mind is so powerful that it can make us do what seems impossible, if we really want to."





A little further was the Akhara of Urdhanavahurs, the saints who believe in putting their bodies through severe austerities. Chandni's eyes popped out. A saint with long corded hair was standing on one leg. He had bent and strapped his other leg with a cloth. Another saint had his one arm raised. Due to disuse, the raised arm had become very thin.





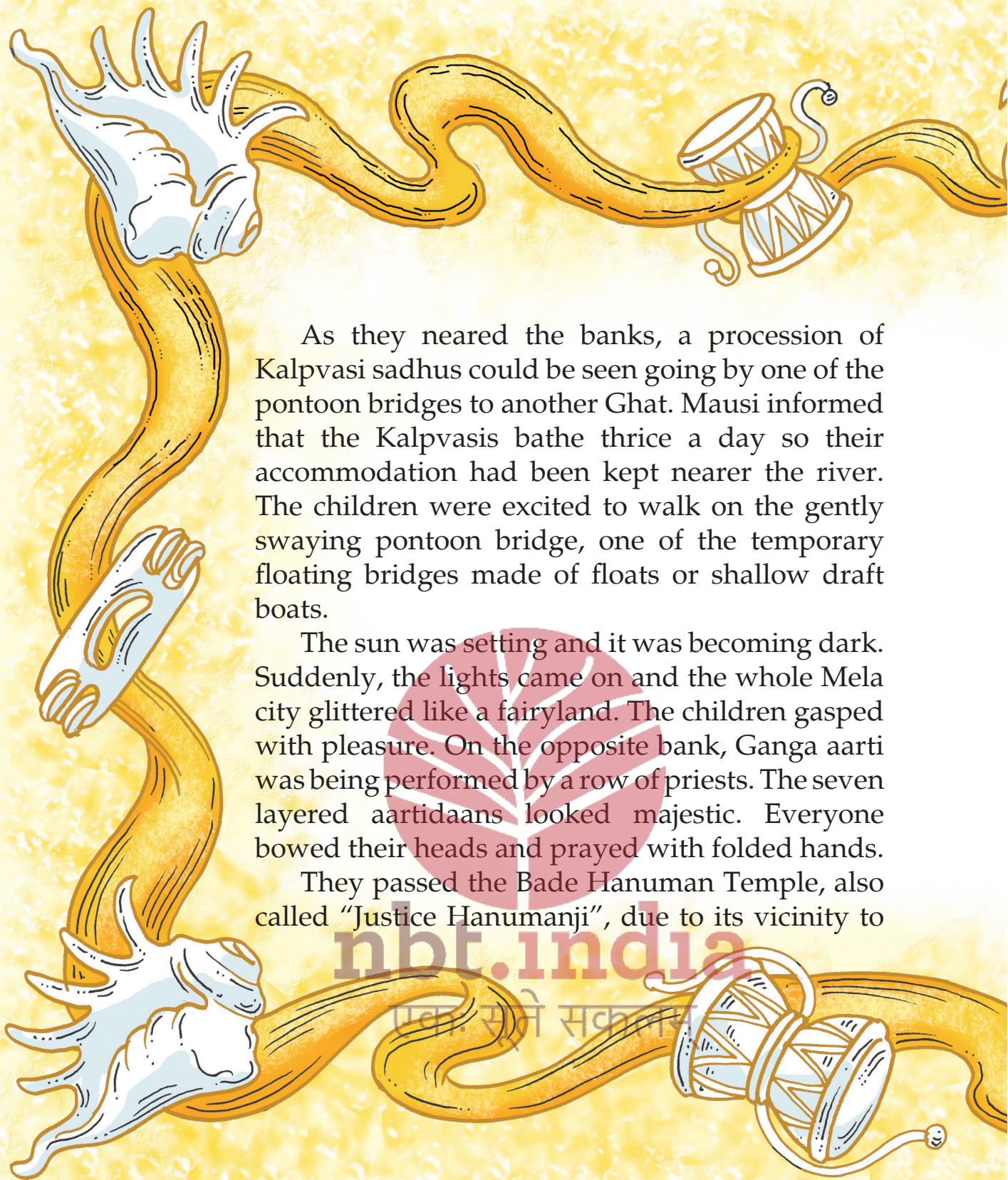
Holding Sooraj's hand, Megha urged him ahead.

"Children do you know, 120 million pilgrims are expected to visit during the eight week period of Kumbh Mela in 2019? Do you know how many zeroes? It has seven zeroes." Children looked shocked to hear this huge figure which their young minds found difficult to imagine.

"Mausi, but where are the toilets for so many people?" queried Chandni.

Megha replied, "More than 1,00,000 toilets have been installed and thousands of young children have volunteered as Swachhta Prahis or Cleanliness Guards."



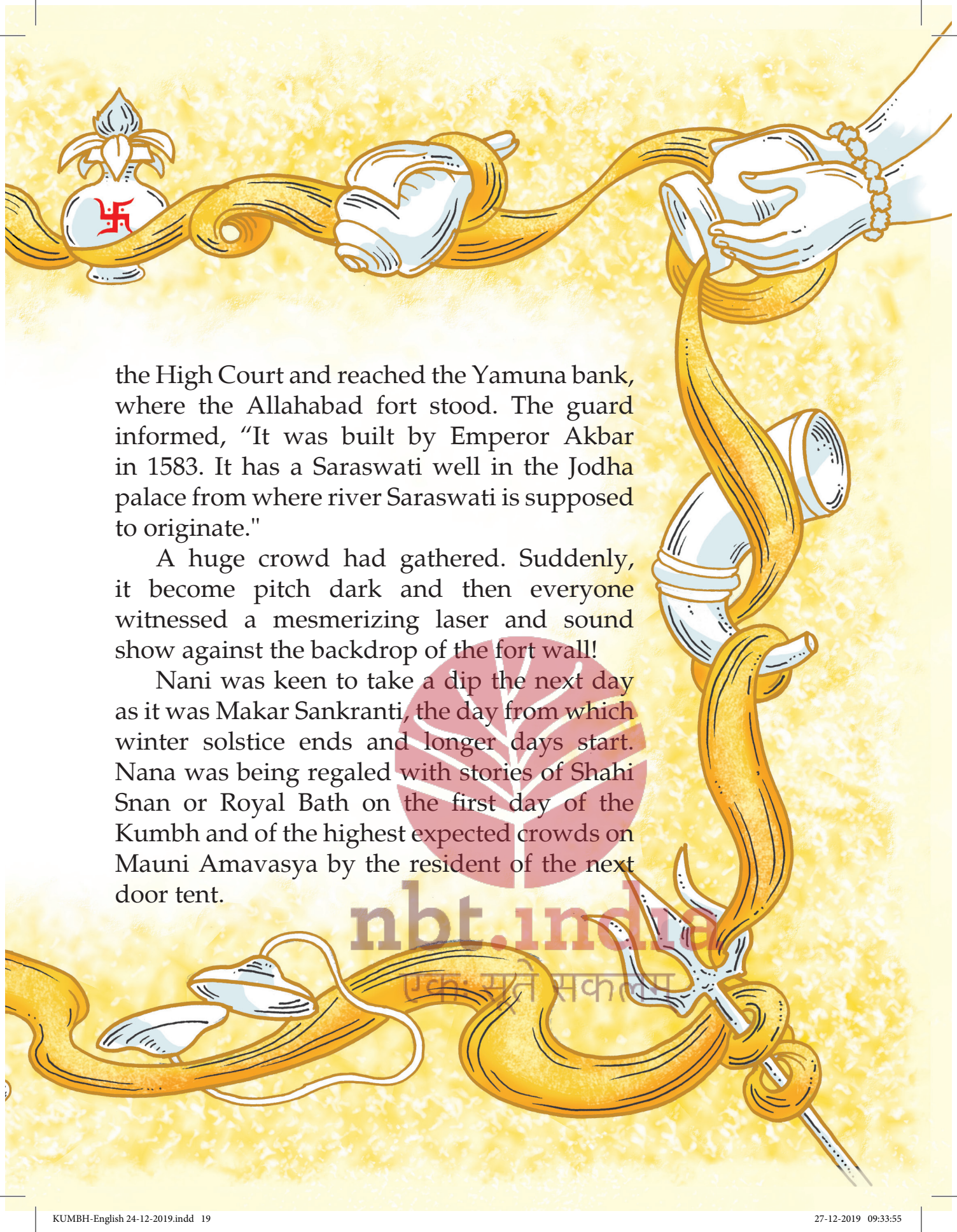


As they neared the banks, a procession of Kalpvasi sadhus could be seen going by one of the pontoon bridges to another Ghat. Mausi informed that the Kalpvasis bathe thrice a day so their accommodation had been kept nearer the river. The children were excited to walk on the gently swaying pontoon bridge, one of the temporary floating bridges made of floats or shallow draft boats.

The sun was setting and it was becoming dark. Suddenly, the lights came on and the whole Mela city glittered like a fairyland. The children gasped with pleasure. On the opposite bank, Ganga aarti was being performed by a row of priests. The seven layered aartidaans looked majestic. Everyone bowed their heads and prayed with folded hands.

They passed the Bade Hanuman Temple, also called "Justice Hanumanji", due to its vicinity to

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the High Court and reached the Yamuna bank, where the Allahabad fort stood. The guard informed, "It was built by Emperor Akbar in 1583. It has a Saraswati well in the Jodha palace from where river Saraswati is supposed to originate."

A huge crowd had gathered. Suddenly, it become pitch dark and then everyone witnessed a mesmerizing laser and sound show against the backdrop of the fort wall!

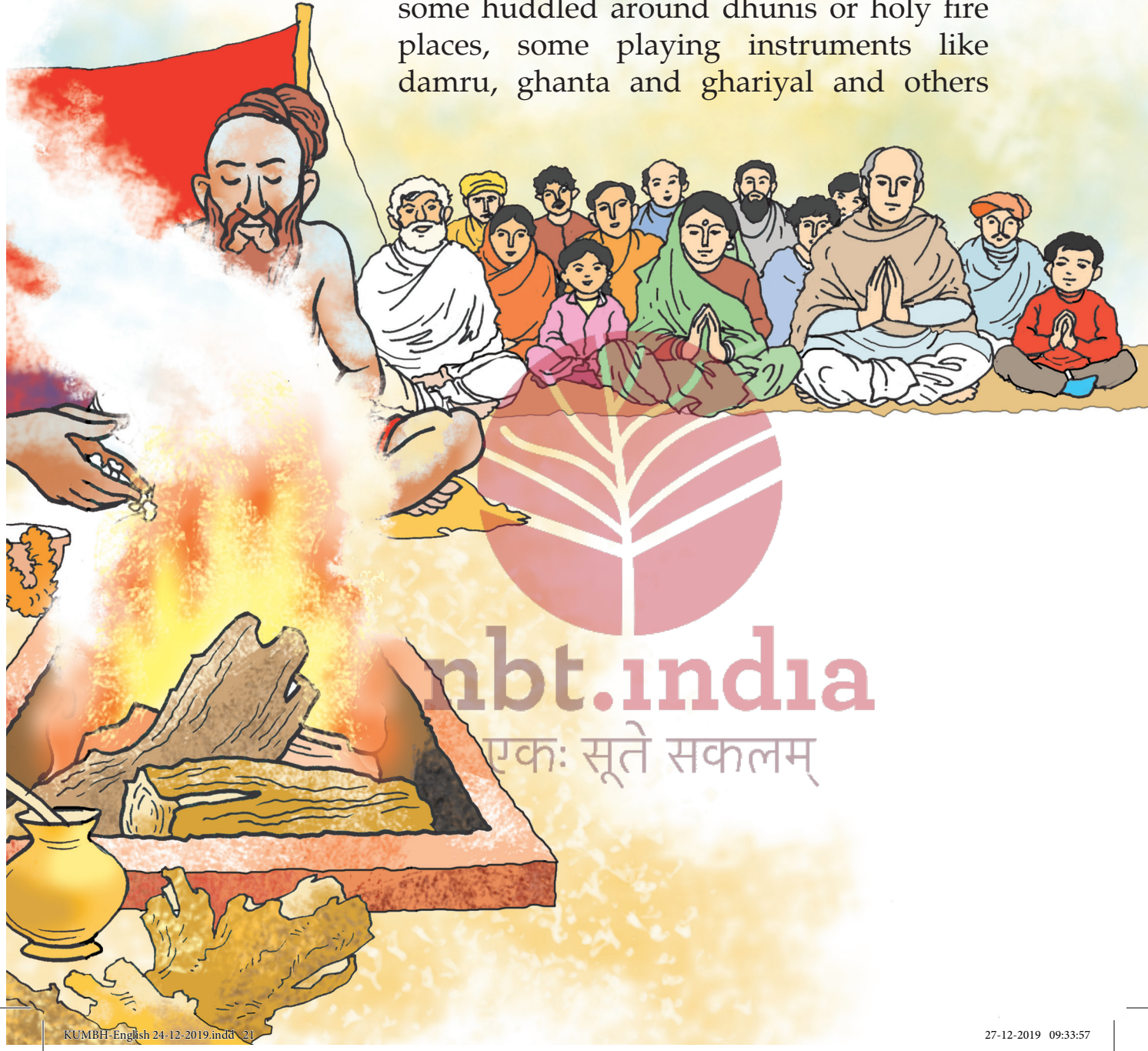
Nani was keen to take a dip the next day as it was Makar Sankranti, the day from which winter solstice ends and longer days start. Nana was being regaled with stories of Shahi Snan or Royal Bath on the first day of the Kumbh and of the highest expected crowds on Mauni Amavasya by the resident of the next door tent.

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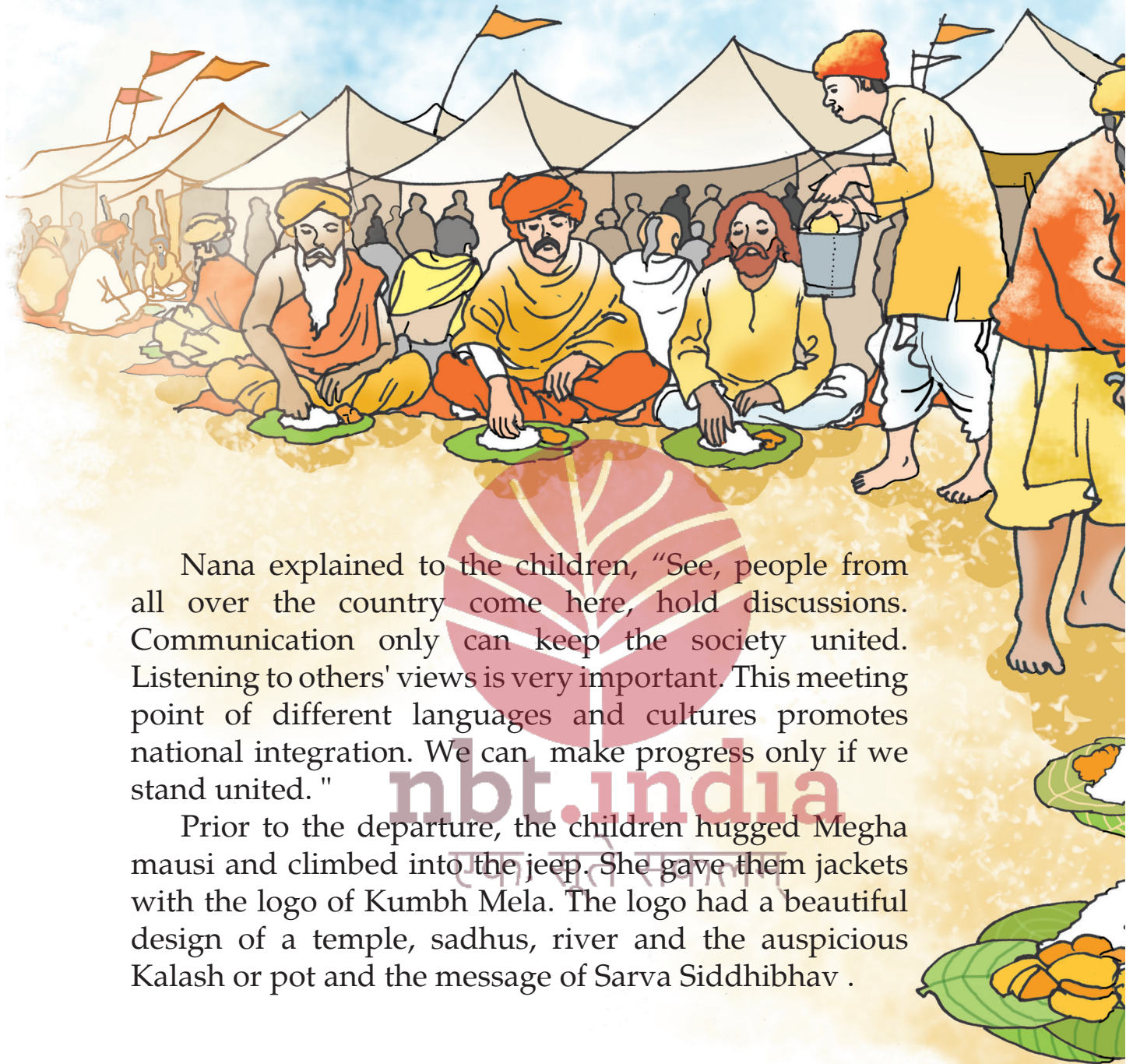


Everyone trooped to the Ghat. Huge floating orange rope river line indicated the deeper part of the river to warn the bathers. Immersed up to their shoulders, everyone took water in their palms and offered it to the Sun, the life giver.

Further up the bank in a huge pandal sat various sadhus—some chanting mantras, some huddled around dhunis or holy fire places, some playing instruments like damru, ghanta and ghariyal and others



sitting on floor for mass dining, without distinction of caste or social status.



Nana explained to the children, "See, people from all over the country come here, hold discussions. Communication only can keep the society united. Listening to others' views is very important. This meeting point of different languages and cultures promotes national integration. We can make progress only if we stand united."

Prior to the departure, the children hugged Megha mausi and climbed into the jeep. She gave them jackets with the logo of Kumbh Mela. The logo had a beautiful design of a temple, sadhus, river and the auspicious Kalash or pot and the message of Sarva Siddhibhav .





Megha mausi explained. "It is belived that the entire universe is in the shape of Kumbh or Kalash. Atmost 84,00,000 species of animals, gods, goddesses, rivers etc. all are inside it. The trinity of Vishnu, Mahesh and Bramha are believed to be at the mouth, neck and base of Kalash respectively, while Goddesses are in the middle.

As the jeep speeded away, Nani smiled and said, "Kumbh is Sarva Siddhibhav or where everything can be accomplished. Children dream big, work hard, never give up, be patient and you can achieve the impossible."



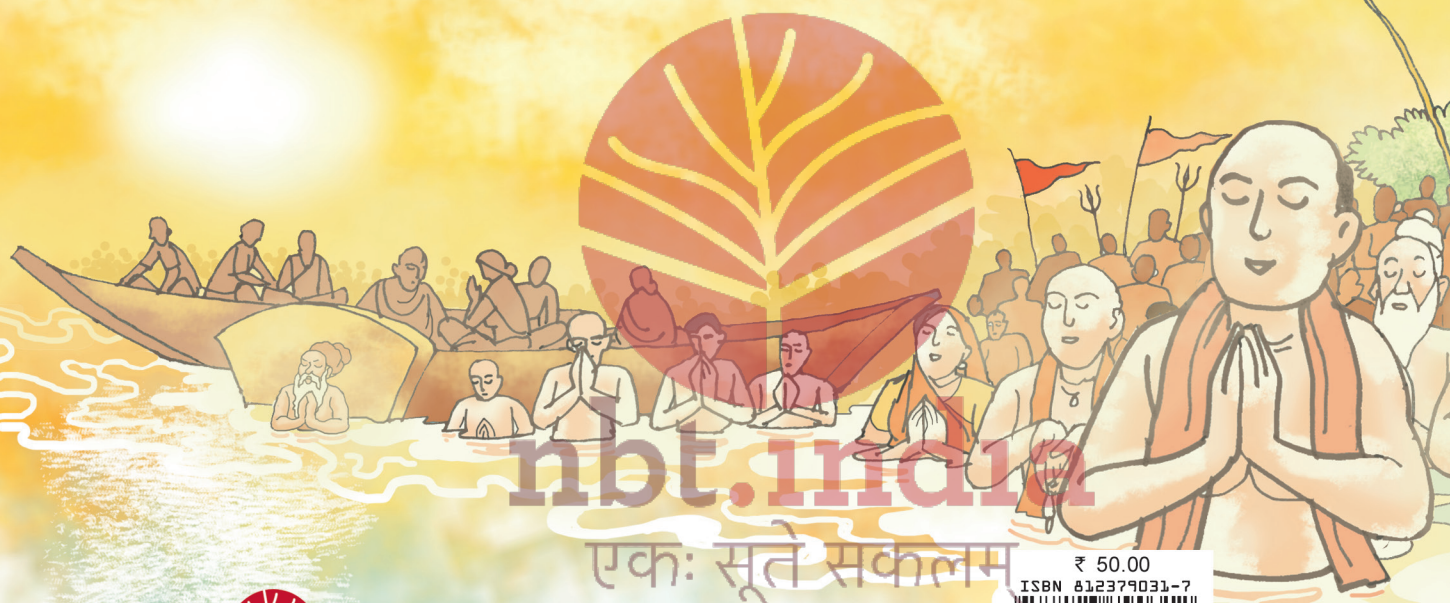
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Dr. Anita Bhatnagar Jain has a diverse spectrum of creative output in both English and Hindi-- from Children's stories based on environment and morality, travelogues to policy research papers on disaster management and public administration, amounting to more than total 40 publications. Her book *Dilli ki Bulbul* has sold more than 25,000 copies and has been translated in Sindhi and Urdu too. Being a senior Indian Administrative Service officer, she has woven stories around real experiences. Passionate about environment, she formed a 'Children's Environmental Army' of 100,000 students and also made a film *Our Earth, Our Home*, screened by UNESCO. She also gives Motivational and Environmental talks. She abides by her philosophy: *One Earth One Life, Let Me Make the Difference*.

Partha Sengupta is an accomplished illustrator of Children's books. A graduate of the prestigious Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata, he has illustrated more than hundred books including many for National Book Trust, India. Previously associated with the Hindustan Times Group, he lives in Delhi.



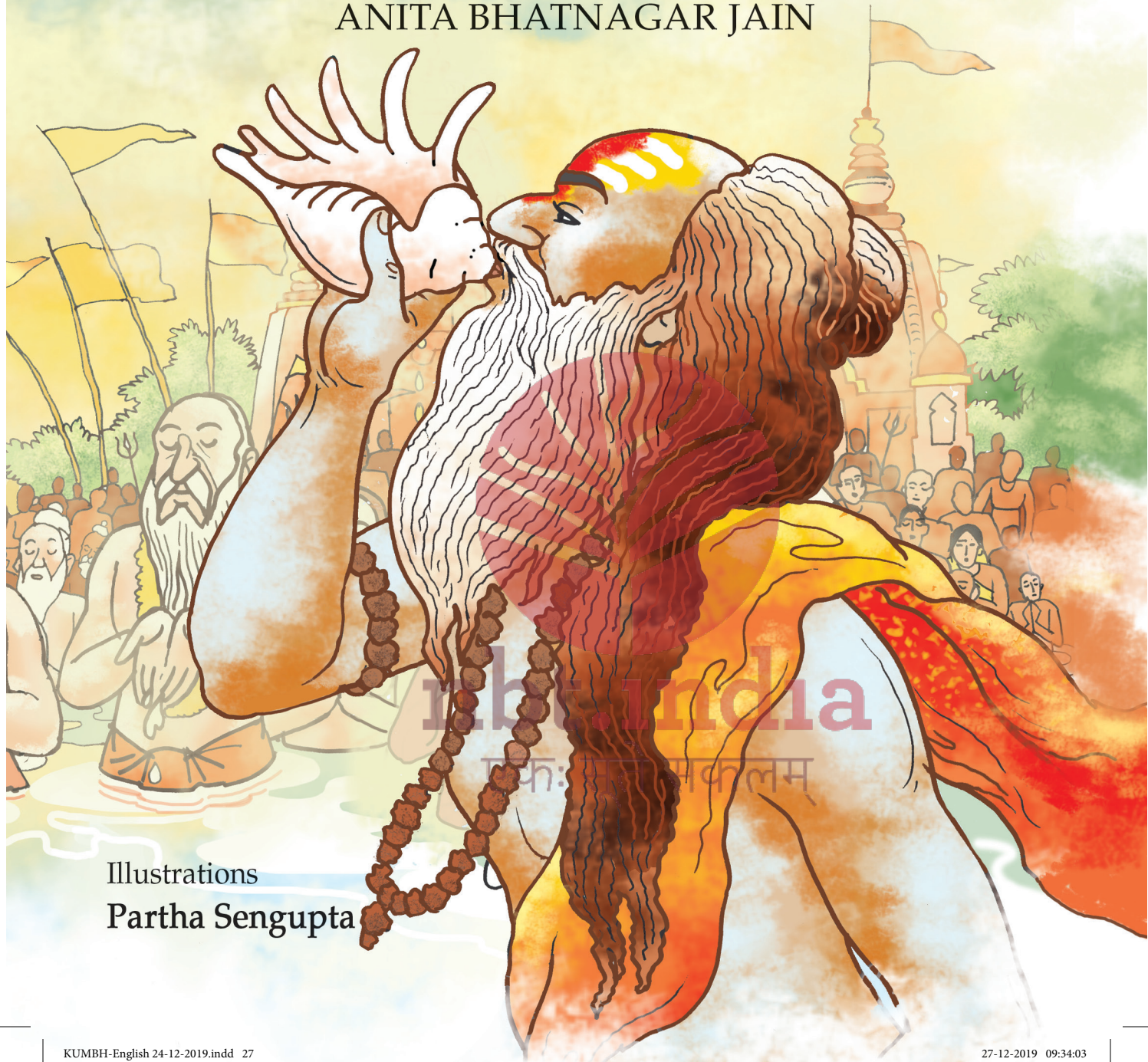
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